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ON PAGE 1

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Saudi Bucks, CIA Backing Give Birth To 'Pipeline Inspector'

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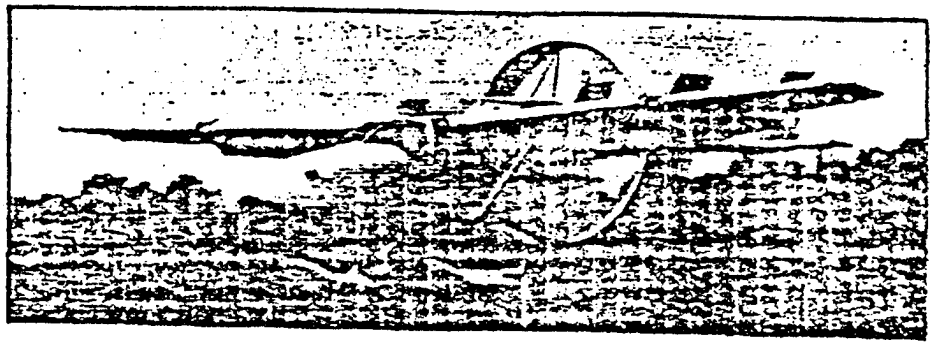

Only its mother could love the ungainly beast: a Cessna O-2 forward air control plane with its front engine removed and a massive shrouded propeller installed between its twin tailbooms, festooned with extra fins and stabilizers and sporting dune-buggy tires and skis. It was quite unknown until the Soloy Company displayed a photo of the machine in its booth at the Helicopter Association International meeting here last week.

Defense Week has learned that the odd-looking brute is no product of an eccentric private contractor. It has been developed using Saudi Arabian money under the auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency, with the full support of the U.S. Air Force. (The CIA responded to queries with "no comment;" the Air Force did not respond.) It is designed to do something that no other aircraft can do: lift off from a 500-foot stretch of soft, ankle-deep sand without churning the desert into a massive cloud and wrecking the engine. It is also extremely quiet in flight, thanks to its slow-turning, shrouded propeller. Silence and long endurance are its big advantages over the helicopter.

The modified O-2 has been developed by Brico, a company with no known background which appears to be headquartered in a Langley, Virginia mailbox. It was delivered by USAF transport to Soloy for modification, and made

The comparison between the two engines, says GD, is "close to a push." The F110 is more powerful, but heavier than the F100. The only significant difference, says Hillaker, is "operability in the upper left-hand corner [high-altitude, low speed] of the envelope, and the F100 with the new digital electronic engine control will have the same characteristics." The XL doesn't need a higher thrust engine than the basic F100, Hillaker notes. "Even though it's bigger and heavier [than the F-16] we have less drag, and we're making our performance targets with the basic engine."

Success in the currently funded 240-sortie test program is vital if the XL is to go forward as a candidate for the USAF's "dual-role fighter" or E-type competition. Work on the F-16E design is concentrating on crew stations and avionics. Having put so much work into cleaning up the XL, Hillaker is naturally reluctant to put the Lantirn navigation in external pods; the system's sensors could find a home in the wing without displacing any fuel. One problem, however, is that a second seat in the F-16 replaces about 1,200 pounds of valuable fuel; the F-15's cockpit is so big that the second crewman can be added without removing anything.

GD says that the Air Force should go ahead with the XL anyway as a direct follow-on for the F-16C/D fleet, even if it chooses the rival F-15 Strike Eagle for the dual-role mission. Such an aircraft, which GD calls the F-16F/G (the G being a two-seater), would have simpler systems than the night-operable F-16E and would cost only 15 percent more than the current F-16, according to Hillaker. With the planned 40-wing force, there would be plenty of room for such a type, providing an interim improved capability against new Soviet fighters such as Fulcrum and Foxhound until the advanced tactical fighter appears in the mid-1990s; a production model F-16F could be available by 1987. At the moment, however, the E-type appears to be the only firm new program in the Air Force's plans.